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SUBJECT: AFTER A THAW, DECREASING GOE TOLERANCE FOR PRESS FREEDOM

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[M.](#) 00 CAIRO 3519

Classified By: DCM Matthew Tueller for reason 1.4 (d).

[11.](#) (C) Summary and comment: The consensus among observers of press freedom in Egypt is that following a high-water mark for openness in 2005, the GOE has been tightening its grip on the press, particularly signaled it will not tolerate journalism that embarrasses President Mubarak or his family. Contacts are worried that these high-profile cases continue, if not increase, its current constraints on the press. However, the independent press is still able to criticize the regime within c

An Opening for the Independent Press

[12.](#) (C) Egypt's first independent papers began appearing in significant numbers in 2004, following decades of domination by government-run and varying quality, began springing up around the same time, and have made a point of criticizing government policy. They have also sometimes launched personal attacks against senior GOE officials, including President Mubarak. "Al-Dustour," (estimated circulation 70,000) run by Ibrahim Eissa (resurrected in 2005 after being shut down in 1998) and "Al-Fagr," (estimated circulation 50,000) edited by Adel Hamouda, began their operations around this time, as well as other independent papers, such as "Nahdet Masr" (estimated circulation 20,000). Popular satellite television talk shows on channels owned by independent businessmen, featuring frank commentary sometimes critical of the government, began operating and gaining popularity during this period. These talk shows reach a much larger Egyptian audience than the print media, due to Egypt's estimated 30 percent illiteracy rate and the economics of Egyptians being able to rent a satellite dish for a negligible fee, versus the daily expense of buying print newspapers. A popular talk show reaches an estimated daily audience of 8-10 million viewers during the prime time hours of 10 PM to 1 AM.

[13.](#) (C) Most observers believe that the government allowed the independent press to reach its highest point of critical expression between 2003 and 2005. Hisham Kassem told us that the print media criticized Mubarak only twice in the decade between 1993 and 2003 -- in the now defunct Labor party paper "Al-Shaab" in 2000 for the government's re-issuance of a novel deemed insulting to Islam (ref M) and in 2003 for Mubarak's negative comments about then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Kassem described a more open atmosphere beginning in 2003 when "the dam broke open" and the GOE tolerated direct criticism of Mubarak on policy, but not personal, grounds. Kassem opined, "The government never would have brought a case against ("Al-Dustour" editor Ibrahim) Eissa in 2005." (Note: Per ref G, a court convicted and sentenced Eissa to two months in prison in September on charges of spreading false information about Mubarak's health. Mubarak commuted the sentence in October. End note.) Said Abdel Hafez of the Multaqa Forum for Development and Human Rights

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Dialogue went further, claiming that between 2003 and 2005, the regime even allowed direct personal criticism of Mubarak. Abdel Hafez described the political atmosphere during the 2003-5 period as being free of politically motivated cases against journalists, detentions of journalists, or gag orders prohibiting reporting on certain topics. Larry Pintak, Director of the American University in Cairo's (AUC) Electronic Media Center, noted that the GOE "even allowed" Muslim Brotherhood members to appear on television talk shows and to be quoted by name in the pro-government papers during the run-up to the 2005 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The Regime Tightening Its Grip

[14.](#) (C) Some contacts view the suit against Ibrahim Eissa in September 2007 as the event that ushered in the current climate of constricted press freedom. Other observers, such as AUC political science professor Maye Kassem and Al-Ahram Center Editor of the journal, "Democracy Review," Hala Mustafa speculated that the regime decided after the 2005 parliamentary elections that it needed to exert increased control over the media in preparation for transferring power to presidential son Gamal Mubarak. Said Abdel Hafez also dated the increased GOE control over press freedom to the Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in the fall 2005 parliamentary elections.

[15.](#) (C) Almost all observers view the current climate as increasingly restrictive, although they differ on the reasons for current GOE policy. Some believe that the regime tolerated an increased degree of press freedom from 2003-2005 because of USC pressure and high-profile public statements supporting democratic institutions in Egypt, and that the

regime began to backtrack as a result of a perceived decreased U.S. emphasis on democratization following Hamas' January 2006 electoral victory. In contrast, Abdel Hafez articulated a cyclical view of GOE tolerance for press freedom, with the government muzzling the press in 1998 after the 1997 Luxor terror attacks, and then relaxing its grip in 2003 before exerting more control following the Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in the fall 2005 parliamentary elections. Emad Mubarak of the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression asserted that the government has accelerated its crackdown against the press in the past six months following the shocks to its authority and competence represented by the Mahalla clashes in April (ref J), the bread crisis this past spring (ref K), and the disastrous Mugattam rockslide in September (ref I). Emad Mubarak viewed the government as fearful and defensive in the wake of these events and moving to stifle media challenges to its weakened political credibility.

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The Current Chill  
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¶6. (C) Contacts view the current press atmosphere as significantly constricted, and see the GOE taking steps to roll back the advances that the independent press has achieved. Hafez Abu Seada of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights told us that because of the proliferation of court cases against journalists, 2008 has been the worst year for press freedom "in the past ten years." Bahey El-Din Hassan of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights told us he believes the GOE is methodically trying to scale back freedom of expression in Egypt through the cases it brings against journalists. Larry Pintak of AUC's electronic media center opined, "The trend for press freedom is clearly in the wrong direction," and noted an atmosphere of fear where journalists "believe they can be detained at any time." Hala Mustafa of the GOE-funded Al-Ahram Center told us that for the first time in 20 years the Al-Ahram Chairman decided this fall to personally vet all overseas travel for editors of the center's publications, a move Mustafa viewed as directed by the security services. Contacts have told us that in the summer of 2008 the GOE began to require Cairo internet cafes to install technology enabling the government to track the names of the cafes' users, a move apparently aimed at better controlling "new media" outlets.

¶7. (C) Engi Haddad of the Afro-Egyptian Human Rights Organization described the regime as intimidating journalists into self-censorship by encouraging lawsuits against independent journalists so that they feel as if "a guillotine is poised above their necks." Haddad also commented that

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while the GOE acts to rein in the print media with its relatively small audience, the government is much more frightened of radio which reaches a much larger non-elite and sometimes illiterate audience. Therefore, she said, the government does not allow independent radio. Cairo University Political Science Professor Abdul-Moneim Al-Mashat described state television news as "ridiculous," bereft of any substantial commentary.

¶8. (C) Throughout the past year, the independent press and the public have been riveted by the high-profile cases against "Al-Dostour" Editor Ibrahim Eissa, against three other editors and Eissa for allegedly insulting senior NDP officials (ref E), and against "Al-Fagr" editor Adel Hamouda for depicting the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in papal robes (ref F). Mubarak's October 6 commutation of Eissa's prison sentence was probably an attempt to avoid alienating political supporters following pleas from pro and quasi-government institutions such as the Journalists' Syndicate and the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR). Hafez Abu Seada of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights told us that NCHR Chairman and former Foreign Minister and UNSYR Boutros Boutros-Ghali personally called Mubarak to urge him to commute Eissa's sentence in order to avoid international approbation. With this dynamic in mind, the government seems to have settled on high fines, as opposed to prison sentences, in these prominent cases as a way to send a tough message to journalists without attracting unduly critical domestic and international attention. The court decision in the case of Eissa and three other editors charged with insulting NDP members, which is expected December 6, will illustrate whether the GOE plans to continue this pattern.

¶9. (C) Separately from these prominent cases, over the past few months the GOE has been detaining journalists and shutting down publications. Police arrested "Al-Dostour" journalist Hossam Al-Wakeel in October after he tried to cover demonstrations following the closure of a Muslim Brotherhood (MB)-affiliated school in Alexandria, and Al-Wakeel remains in jail despite a November 18 court order for his release. In September, the GOE revoked the magazine "Al-Zohour's" license after an MB member took over as editor-in-chief. Pro-government "Al-Gomhoriya" fired a columnist in late October for writing an article criticizing the GOE response to Saudi treatment of female Egyptian guest workers. In October, the GOE arrested an anchor from "Al-Nas" television, a Salafist station, and a human rights activist who closely follows torture cases confirmed to us that the police brutalized the journalist in detention before releasing him. In April, the GOE shut down the Cairo News Company media production firm for providing uplink services for an Al-Jazeera broadcast of protesters stomping on posters of Mubarak during the Mahalla clashes; in November, a court fined the firm's president (ref C).

¶10. (C) Contacts have pointed out that the cumulative effect of all these cases and actions has been to cast a chill over the media. Hisham Kassem, who founded "Al-Masry Al-Youn" but is no longer with the paper, observed that "Al-Masry" has shied away from critical reporting in the last year, and that the television talk shows have recently featured much less material potentially offensive to government sensitivities. Kassem described State Security Investigative Services (SSIS) as taking a more active role in contacting journalists to warn against reporting on sensitive subjects. A prominent independent journalist confided to us that SSIS has been calling him aggressively to inquire into the new paper he is setting up. He noted that the only way he can keep SSIS at bay is to include a pro-government figure on his board who

will report to the regime "everything that goes on inside the paper." Such an arrangement, he reasoned, is preferable to constant harassment from SSIS.

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The Draft Media Law as a Sword of Damocles  
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¶11. (C) Many observers believe that the current draft media broadcast law which proposes creating a government agency empowered to act as a censor serves to further constrict the climate of press freedom as a "sword of Damocles," threatening journalists with additional institutionalized supervision. The draft law is reportedly based on an Arab League "Media Project" adopted in February (ref L). We are hearing conflicting reports over whether the GOE will submit the draft law to parliament during the current session, but the government has been silent about its intentions, probably to intimidate the press and civil society. Most of our human

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rights contacts are still under the impression that the GOE plans to move forward with the media law. A prominent university professor told us that the Saudi ambassador to Egypt confided to him in early November that the Arab League would withdraw its draft media project out of fear that its passage would subject Arab states to criticism from the international community and ridicule by the international press.

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Some Press Freedom Advances Still Preserved  
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¶12. (C) Despite the government's backslicing on press freedom, a current Egyptian newsstand with its colorful mix of pro-government, independent and sensationalist newspapers is still a significant improvement from the drab collection of pro-government and heavily censored party papers that dominated the same stand only five years ago. The independent press is still able to criticize the government and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) if it avoids ad hominem attacks. For example, following the early November NDP party conference (ref B), the independent press robustly criticized the ruling party for failing to provide a coherent plan to address Egypt's economic and political problems, and the government did not take any punitive steps. Embassy contact Osama El-Ghazali Harb, president of the opposition Democratic Front Party, asked rhetorically in "Al-Masry Al-Youm" why "the majority of the people hate the NDP," and accused the party of "adopting totalitarianism." The evening talk shows continue to broadcast content critical of the government, such as sexual assault victim Noha Rushdie's recent on-air pillorying of the police for failing to take her complaint seriously (ref D). Cairo University Professor Al-Mashat told us that the leading pro-government newspaper "Al-Ahram" has published several of his editorials that have been critical of government policy on combating poverty, social alienation and the crisis in education. One pro-government intellectual, Dr. Gamal Sultan of the GOE-funded Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, went so far as to claim to us that Egypt's press is the most free in the Arab world, and suggested that the U.S. should praise its progress. Prime Minister Nazif pledged to the Ambassador in September that as long as he remains in office, the GOE will neither censor Facebook, nor the internet in general (ref H).

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A Downward Trend, but Some Activists Undaunted  
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¶13. (C) Comment: Facing widespread poverty, an uncertain succession process, and the proliferation of new media that it cannot control, the government has become increasingly intolerant of media criticism that personally embarrasses Mubarak and his family. Anxious about the 2010 and 2011 elections (after the MB's 2005 success and Hamas' 2006 victory), and still on the defensive from the Mahalla clashes and its poor response to the Mugattam rockslide, the GOE appears to be on track to continue its current strategy of constraining press freedoms. The GOE will also probably try to continue its current balancing act of moving against independent journalists when they cross red-lines, while working to avoid alienating domestic supporters and exposing itself to international criticism. Still, in the current, increasingly constricted environment, bloggers are working to push the limits of GOE tolerance by trying to expose issues such as police brutality (ref A), and independent journalists are striving to create a more professional and critical media to build on past advances in press freedom.

SCOBEDY